

CALL FOR PAPERS

THE PUBLIC COUNTRY HOUSE:

'TREASURE OF QUIET BEAUTY' OR A SITE FOR PUBLIC HISTORIES?

16th & 17th May 2024; two-day symposium at the V&A in partnership with the National Trust

'I venture to think that the country houses of Britain with their gardens, their parks, their pictures, their furniture and their peculiar architectural charm, represent a treasure of quiet beauty.'

Philip Kerr, 11th Marquess of Lothian and former owner of NT Blickling Hall, 1937.

'[There is] a growing awareness of the complexity and significance of the country house in all its manifold and multifarious ways, from slavery to gender, the local community to the British Empire, horticulture to transport, politics to recreation.'

David Cannadine, 'The British Country House Revisited', in D. Cannadine and J. Musson (eds), The Country House: Past, Present, Future (Rizzoli, 2018), p. 15.

'Understanding the importance of imperial wealth and artefacts to the purchase, building and furnishing of ... country houses underscores how these built environments – far from being exclusively British or English – were shaped by long histories of global interaction.'

Margot Finn and Kate Smith, 'Introduction', in M. Finn and K. Smith (eds), The East India Company at Home, 1757-1857 (UCL Press, 2018), p. 12.

The British country house: family home or public cultural asset? Glorious exemplar of historic taste or contested site of public history? A visually enthralling historic stage set, or a site to inform understanding of our national histories?

There are millions of visits to country houses every year in the UK, and recent events have demonstrated how the public country house is emerging as a new front line of public history. In England the Country House Scheme, first established in the 1930s by Lord Lothian, has allowed

many of the most significant country houses and their estates to transfer ownership to the National Trust through acceptance in lieu of taxation. This has meant that in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, country houses – sometimes with their collections – could be saved for the nation to enjoy as a ‘treasure of quiet beauty’. Nearly ninety years on, the research landscape surrounding country houses has transformed, encompassing topics beyond questions of patronage, the histories of interior taste and style, to also address collective histories of people and place, and local, regional, national and global histories and object provenance.

The country house is no longer only a unique index of aristocratic or elite artistic and architectural taste over time, it is also a living cultural resource for its increasingly diverse audiences. How are these multi-layered sites – at once former and present family homes, public museums, heritage attractions, and exemplars of global exchange networks in microcosm – curated, presented and interpreted in the present? What does this shift and the accompanying research mean for the way these sites present and interpret their houses, gardens and collections? And what might the country house of the future look like?

Taking place online and at the [V&A South Kensington](#) on 16th and 17th May 2024, this two-day conference explores what role the country house plays in our national understanding of social and global histories, art and culture, and the axes of change around which such sites are turning, including diverse audience expectation, the climate crisis, and national historical narratives. The conference will focus on public country houses: i.e. those owned, opened, and managed by charitable organisations with an obligation to provide public benefit.

The public country house: ‘Treasure of quiet beauty’ or a site for public histories? will bring together an international community of colleagues working across heritage, museums, arts & culture, and academia to explore the past, present, and potential future/s of the country house. Through panels, roundtable discussions, and creative interventions, together we will map the barriers to presentation and interpretation in publicly accessible country houses, share ideas and examples of innovative curatorial and interpretative practice internationally, and develop tools and methodologies for change that cut across disciplinary boundaries.

We invite proposals for 15-20-minute presentations of any format. We also welcome full panel proposals as well as roundtable discussions, workshops, and creative submissions. **Proposals might engage with, but are not limited to, the following themes:**

Researching the country house

- Narratives of loss and destruction; the history of the saving of the country house in the 21st century, fifty years on from the V&A’s *Destruction of the Country House* exhibition.
- Authenticity: Understanding the significance and preservation of the material past.
- The potential for country houses to act as case studies in shared national histories.
- Exploring the received family histories of place alongside the plural significance of local, regional, national, and global histories, including of contested histories or marginalised histories.

21st-century meanings of the public country house and its evolving roles

- Imagining and celebrating the country house of the future.
- Country houses and estates as the nuclei around which entire communities, and big historical moments, are contingent.
- Climate change, the environment, and the country house.
- Country houses as sites of creativity and innovation; the dialogues between historic collections and contemporary art.

Evolving methodologies for interpretation and display for a range of different audiences

- The future of country house audiences and visiting trends.
- Critique of country house re-presentations for different audiences: national and international case studies.
- Tools and methodologies for audience engagement, particularly regarding presentation and interpretation – e.g. immersive and sensory presentation, interpretation and experience.

The above themes may be interpreted as broadly or creatively as you wish. We are particularly keen to hear from those working in heritage spaces, museums, galleries, cultural organisations, or as creative practitioners.

Abstracts of c.250 words (with a brief bio) should be sent to the project's Principal Investigator, Dr Oliver Cox (o.cox@vam.ac.uk) by **09:00 GMT (UTC+0) on Tuesday 2 January 2024**. We would be grateful if you could also let us know if you have any access requirements (e.g. online-only attendance). If you're not sure how or where your proposal might fit, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

This conference is part of **'Private' spaces for public benefit? Historic houses as sites for research and knowledge exchange innovation**, a collaborative project led by the V&A and the National Trust. The project is generously supported by a British Academy Innovation Fellowship Award.